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ABSTRACT

African-American parents whose children attended 12 different Baltimore City Public Schools (Maryland) made it clear while participating in a focus group that white teachers have a lot to learn about teaching their children. Forty-three parents whose children were involved in an enrichment program at an urban community college emphasized that they want teachers to come into the classroom with a belief that their children can learn. Parents pointed out that life is different in the inner city, and that teachers would be more helpful if they knew more about the political and economic conditions in the child's community. They also want teachers to understand African-American history and culture, as well as how best to teach their children. Finally, these parents want teachers to see their children as unique people and know that parents are willing to be partners in the education of their children. (Contains 15 references.) (Author/SLD)

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Telling Their Stories: African-American Parents Talk To White Teachers.

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TELLING THEIR STORIES: AFRICAN-AMERICAN PARENTS TALK TO WHITE TEACHERS

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Introduction

Do white teachers who work in urban areas need special training in order to teach African-American children? A group of Baltimore City parents seem to feel so. African-American parents have a clear message for white teachers coming into their community to teach their children: "Know that our children are bright with high potential."

Forty-three parents whose children were involved in an enrichment project at an urban community college met in a focus group format. The parents, whose children attend twelve different Baltimore City public schools, made it clear that white teachers have a lot to learn about teaching African-American children. These parents felt that teachers needed to come into the classroom with a belief that their children can learn. They also wanted teachers to understand African-American history and culture, as well as how best to teach their children. Finally these parents wanted teachers to see their children as unique people and know

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that parents are willing to be partners in the education of their children.

These parents were part of our effort to break down the cultural barrier that often exists between white students and the culturally diverse children they teach. Working in a College of Education with a predominantly white student body, we found that our white students are often uncomfortable with the young African-American children and their parents, and feel like aliens in their community.

This article focused on African-American children because they compose the majority of students in our local urban school system. The same techniques described in this article to learn about the diversity of the community would apply with other groups. Many of the suggestions made by these parents apply to all children regardless of color or cultural background.

Expectations

Ms. Booker noted that she wanted teachers to know that "African-American children are bright with a high potential. Teachers expectations are less for African-American children. I want them to have a positive attitude. Our children are bright." "Our children are intelligent, quick learners," Mr. Rogers, pointed out. He went on, "If you challenge their minds and challenge them

(they will perform)."

It's important for the teacher to come into the class "with a positive attitude, believing that all children can learn," felt Ms. Roland. She felt that even "kids with behavior problems want you to help. Teachers shouldn't stereotype kids."

The negative consequences of teachers having low expectations of children have been well documented in the literature (Good and Brophy, 1994); Rosenthal 1973; Rosenthal and Jacobson, 1968). Thus, it is essential that teachers are taught to have a positive view of the children they teach.

The African-American Experience

Mr. Morgan received wide agreement from the parents when he said that teachers "needed to know about Black-American history, and teach it more than one month a year." Parents pointed out that often life is difficult in the urban-inner city. One parent described life as a "struggle". Ms.Frank felt that teachers would be of more help if they knew "about the political and economic conditions in the child's community."

There are many things that classroom teachers can do to build upon the input learned from these parents. African-American history and culture needs to be infused into the curriculum on a daily basis. Teachers can feature the works of African-American

authors in the classroom, whether they be picture books or chapter books, and note the presence of African-Americans when discussing historical figures or people in the community. When studying other nations, one can include an African country.

Learning Styles of Children

In describing how his child likes to learn, Mr. Royal, noted that, "My kid likes to touch everything. That's the way he learns." Parents want teacher to cue in to the unique ways in which their children learn best and teach that way.

The literature notes that African-American children have unique learning and thinking styles (Hale, 1981; Pai, 1990). Teachers should be helped to understand these traits and incorporate them into the learning process.

Jackson (1990) suggests that African-Americans favor multisensory learning techniques. Kinesthetic and active learning experiences have a high prognosis of success, and teachers can use the creative arts to develop concepts and skills (Lee 1986). Knowing that African-American children like "hands on" learning, the teacher can regularly make sure that every lesson has a kinesthetic component. When learning letters, one can trace them in the air, or in sand, or on a friend's back, as well as experience them verbally and visually. Teachers can make sure that

all art and science projects have a hands-on component.

According to Shade (1989), African-American learners are field-dependent thinkers who need concepts and ideas assessed in totality rather than as discrete details. African-American learners view the relationship of what is to be learned in terms of how it influences their lives (Hale-Benson 1988).

Using the African-American student's culturally learned skills as a team player, teachers can involve children in cooperative learning activities. Role playing and simulations will also work well with these active learners. Integrated learning, whole language, and the unit approach builds on the child's need to see relationships between topics being learned.

The African-American Male Child

Of particular concern to the parents interviewed, was the fate of the African-American male child. Many parents expressed great fears for their male children. There was consensus that teachers needed to make a greater effort to understand the male child. As Ms. Price pointed out, "They need to be challenged by something special which will hold their interest and prevent them from dropping out mentally when they are in the fifth grade."

The need for more male teachers, particularly African-Americans, was noted by the group. Parents felt that African-

American men in the classroom could serve as positive role models for their children.

Female teachers can also consciously involve male adults in the classroom experience. Fathers and other adult males should be actively encouraged to involve themselves in the classroom, either by going on field trips, demonstrating a skill, or just coming in to be with children. Female teachers can call local colleges and ask for male volunteers to work with boys in her classroom. Local African-American churches and organizations can also be asked to find male members who will work in the classroom.

Violence is a problem in urban schools. The group discussed the fact that there was a lot of fighting in schools, particularly among males. One mother pointed out, "Everything is a conflict. Kids feel that they need to fight everything out." Ms. Logan felt that teachers needed to teach kids other ways to solve problems by teaching them conflict resolution skills.

Teachers can be taught to make a conflict resolution center a feature of every classroom. One can have a special desk where children who have disagreements can go. In the center, there can be a "speaking ball", which needs to be held by the person wanting to speak. The other person of course is the listener. The children can learn that only the person holding the ball is

permitted to speak. The teacher can make sure that the ball changes hands and everyone is given a chance to present their case. Children can be given prompts on cards such as: "When you do ... it makes me feel ..."; "I don't like it when you ... because...". Other students can be used to "mediate" the dispute and help the disputing parties to reach a compromise solution.

Discipline With Dignity

Another parent pointed out that it's important to understand how the child has been raised. "Just because a child calls out," he noted, "doesn't mean that he is disruptive. It's just the way be has learned to respond."

Trainers can encourage teachers to set appropriate limits in the classroom and enforce them, with dignity. Respect is very important to African-American children. One can impose a penalty and yet still be respectful. A child who violates a class rule can be called aside and told privately, "Excuse me, John, but your behavior is inappropriate. You will need to please go over to the chair and take "time out" for five minutes."

Know the Children

Parents want white teachers to get closer to their children. They want teachers to get to know each individual child's strengths. As Ms. Bush said, "Ask each child personally what he

likes to do."

Teachers need to know what their child's life is like at home, parents felt. The group felt that teachers should visit the children in their homes. Ms. Hundel suggested that her child's teacher should be her house guest and "live the life of an inner-city child for a weekend."

As a way of learning about the community, teachers can be trained to explore the neighborhood around the school and see where the children play. One of the parents in the class can be the teacher's guide. Teachers can also visit the neighborhood on the weekend and see what life is like for the child. One can also do their shopping in the neighborhood.

It is important to understand the child and his problems. "African-American children are not problem children, but sometimes children with problems," Ms. Evans pointed out.

African-American children have a unique cultural experience which is often different than that of their white teachers. The teacher can take advantage of the person-oriented style of the African-American community by using small groups and peer tutoring, and allowing a great deal of personal contact with the teacher (Jackson 1990).

Teachers can also learn about their students by having them

write or dictate an autobiography. Children can be encouraged to include the things that they like to do. They can also routinely share with the class something about themselves.

See Parents as Partners

Hyson (1993) notes that most African-American parents support attempts to enhance their children's learning. Many programs designed to enhance the cognitive performance of African-American children have reported success after involving parents (Edwards, 1992; Garlington, 1993; Pellegrini, Perlmutter, Galda, and Brody, 1990).

The interviewed parents were united in feeling that teachers needed to establish a strong relationships with them. Parents want teachers to see them as "part of the school". African-American parents want their child's teacher to communicate with them and share concerns. "Parents" need not be a child's biological mother and father but could be the child's grandmother, grandfather, aunt, uncle, or other important adult. The child's "family" can consists of many people.

Teachers should feel free to draw upon the child's family as resources, the group felt. Parents felt they could help by organizing tutoring programs and activities designed to teach children skills that parents know. In fact, all of the parents

felt that the classroom teacher should ask them at the beginning of the year about how best to teach their children and relate to their community.

Ms.Jordan put the issue into perspective when she noted, "Teachers are not miracle workers. I don't want the teacher to do my job as parent. I will work as a partner with the teacher, but I need to do my job as the parent."

One can organize a parent room advisory council which will meet on a monthly basis and give feedback about what is going on in the community. A teacher can invest some time in helping make the community a better place by joining the parents in a community project.

An open door policy for parent visits can help break down barriers. One parent noted that her child's teacher put out a coffee pot in the morning and inviting parents who are on their way to work to drop in early for a cup of coffee and see what is going on in the classroom.

Don't Be Afraid

Mr. Price noted that white teachers are often afraid of African-American children and this fear inhibits the teacher's ability to get close to students. He pointed out, "A young white teacher in class with forty Black children acting crazy - the

teacher is afraid. She doesn't know how to discipline children in the classroom. You have to learn to be strong in front of them." Parents want teachers to be positive with their children. They felt that children needed "to know when what they did is good". Many parents favored certificates as rewards for good work.

Conclusion

Teacher trainers can better prepare white pre-service students to meet the needs of culturally diverse children. Cultural sensitivity involves working directly with the parents to learn about the culture of the community and the unique learning styles of the children. With this information the teacher can structure the classroom for success.

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Note: All names of parents have been changed.

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Abstract

African-American parents whose children attend twelve different Baltimore City Public Schools made it clear while participating in a focus group that white teachers have a lot to learn about teaching their children. They want teachers to come into the classroom with a belief that their children can learn. They also want teachers to understand African-American history and culture, as well as how best to teach their children. Finally these parents want teachers to see their children as unique people and know that parents are willing to be partners in the education of their children.